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ALLAN BLOOM

The Democratization of the University

"The Democratization of the University" is an early essay by Allan Bloom, author of the bestselling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). This essay introduces the themes Bloom developed therein, that is, the threats egalitarianism and relativism pose to the liberal university and a democratic society. The essay is based on Bloom's experiences with student protests in the 1960s at Cornell University. Bloom taught on the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago until his death in 1992.

"Do you too believe, as do the many, that certain young men are corrupted by sophists, and that there are certain sophists who in a private capacity corrupt to an extent worth mentioning? Isn't it rather the very men who say this who are the biggest sophists, who educate most perfectly and who turn out young and old, men and women, just the way they want them to be?"

"But when do they do that?" he said.

"When many gathered together sit down in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or any other common meeting of a multitude, and, with a great deal of uproar, blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and, besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of blame and praise. Now in such circumstances, as the saying goes, what do you suppose is the state of the young man's heart? Or what kind of private education will hold out for him and not be swept away by such blame and praise and go, borne by the flood, wherever it tends so that he'll say the same things are noble and base as they do, practice what they practice, and be such as they are?"

"The necessity is great, Socrates," he said.

"And yet," I said, "we still haven't mentioned the greatest necessity."

"What?" he said.

"What these educators and sophists inflict in deed when they fail to persuade

> in speech. Or don't you know that they punish the man who's not persuaded with dishonor, fines and death? . . . So what other sophist or what sort of private speeches do you suppose will go counter to these and prevail? . . . Even the attempt is a great folly."[1]

The modern university was that great folly of an attempt to establish a center for reflection and education independent of the regime and the pervasive influence of its principles, free of the overwhelming effect of public opinion in its crude and subtle forms, devoted to the dispassionate quest for the important and comprehensive truths. It was to be an independent island within civil society, the sovereign Republic of Letters. It tried to disprove the Socratic contention that he who shares bed and board with the rulers, be they kings or peoples, would soon have to share their tastes and way of life, and that thus the thinker must separate himself in heart and mind from the currents of party passion in order to liberate himself from prejudice. The modern university has as its premises that free thought can exist in full view of the community unthreatened by the public passions and that it can be of service while preserving its integrity. Academic freedom was to protect scholars from the most obtrusive violations of their independence and was designed to draw them from private isolation into the public institutions; tenure is the most visible expression of that principle in the modern university.

Previously, it had been understood that democracies were in particular need of the enlightening function of the university, both because democracies necessarily have a large proportion of uneducated rulers and because public opinion reigns supreme in them without the counterpoising effect exercised by an aristocratic class which incorporates different principles and to the protection of which dissenters can repair. The presence of the university was the means of combining excellence with egalitarianism, reason with the consent of the governed. But precisely because it is so necessary to democracies, it is particularly threatened in nations where equality takes on the character of a religion and can call forth all the elements of fanaticism. In the first place this is so because democracy's fundamental beliefs are difficult to question; flattery of the regime and of the people at large is hard to avoid. Democratic sycophancy becomes a great temptation; one not resisted without difficulty and risk. And, in the second place, the university is, willy-nilly, in some sense aristocratic in both the conventional and natural senses of the term. It cannot, within broad limits, avoid being somewhat more accessible to the children of men of means than to the children of the poor, and it forms men of different tastes from those of the people at large who are, it is not to be forgotten, the real rulers. And the university is supposed to educate those who are more intelligent and to set up standards for their achievement which cannot be met by most men. This cannot but be irritating to democratic sensibilities.

Now the most obvious, the most comprehensive, the truest explanation of

what is going on in our universities today is the triumph of a radical egalitarian view of democracy over the last remnants of the liberal university. This kind of egalitarianism insists that the goal of a democratic society is not equality of opportunity but factual equality; it comes equipped with all the doctrines which are necessary to persuade its adherents that such an equality is possible and that its not being actual is a result of vicious special interests; it will brook no vestige of differentiation in qualities of men. It would more willingly accept a totalitarian regime than a free one in which the advantages of money, position, education, and even talent are unevenly distributed. The liberal university with its concentration on a humane education and high standards had already been almost engulfed by the multiversity which is directed to the service of the community and responsive to the wishes of its constituency.

Now the universities have become the battleground of a struggle between liberal democracy and radical, or, one might say, totalitarian, egalitarianism. Therefore, it is not only the fact that universities are so much in the news that makes them central to any discussion of how democratic America is, it is also because they educate the best of our young, now more than half of them; because what they teach will ultimately determine the thought of the nation; and because the struggle going on in them concerns the interpretation of the meaning of our institutions and their goodness or badness. All this discussion takes place within the context of democracy, for both the defenders and critics of our regime accept the premise that democracy is the one legitimate regime, the only issue being whether the United States is sufficiently or truly a democracy.

The gradual politicization of the university can be seen partially by the extent of the concern expressed about it in society at large. Political men are constantly talking about universities and what they should or should not do. The universities have lost their neutrality as well as control of their destinies. Previously matters of curricula and student conduct were thought to be properly matters of internal university policy. Now the sense of the university's mission has been lost, and, at the same time, what has been going on within it has succeeded in frightening and arousing the political community. The former secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Robert Finch, has even gone so far as to make an attack on the tenure system, the vital heart of academic freedom. Following professorial and student radicals, he accurately assessed the fact that it is the faculties which are most likely to be recalcitrant in an attempt to make the universities responsive to immediate concerns and that tenure protects them. He characterized faculties in much the same way as Marxists do the bourgeoisie in a capitalist system. They are, according to him, a privileged class protecting special and private interests. He sees no principle embodied in their unusual status; the issues are so clear, as he sees them, that only private vice could be the source of their unwillingness to change with the times. We are overburdened by the pontifications of journalists as well as politicians, and professors, administrators, and students look to the newspapers and television for publicity and

support. All of this indicates the extent to which universities have become a part of the system of public opinion.

But these are only symptoms. One must look within the universities themselves to see the full magnitude of what has happened. The primary fact is the advent of student power, which, if it means anything, means an extreme democratization of the university. It is a democratization in several senses: it extends the range of power to everyone present (things have gone so far that maintenance personnel are to sit in some university legislative bodies); even the usually accepted notions of age and stake in the community as standards for participation are considered discriminatory; and, most important of all, the special claim of competence is ignored or rejected. Professors, as well as students, frequently deny that their learning gives them title to govern the university or to determine what is important for it to represent. Everyone is listening to young people these days, and they are talking.

The most stunning example of this about which I know is what happened at Cornell. When black students carrying guns and thousands of white students supporting them insisted that the faculty abandon the university's judicial system, the minimal condition of civil community within the university, and backed up that insistence with threats, the faculty capitulated. Most of the faculty members who voted for capitulation argued that this was the will of the community, what the students wanted. They had talked to many students, and the students strongly desired that the faculty reverse itself. These professors could satisfy their consciences by turning to public opinion. So democratic had they become that they accepted a mob gathered in an atmosphere of violence as a true public. So weak were their convictions about what a university is that they could find legitimacy only in public approval by their student constituency; their scholarly competence provided no source for independent judgment. Their souls had become democratic and egalitarian to a degree far greater than that demanded by the principles of the regime; the regime requires that every citizen abide by the duly expressed will of the majority, not that the mind of man be determined by the taste of the community at large. In this instance there was a realization of Socrates' comic comparison of a democracy to the solemn deliberations of a group of children who are empowered to choose between the dietary prescriptions of a doctor and those of a pastry chef. Here, though, the doctors accepted the legitimacy of the tribunal.

In order to see the full dimensions of the situation and to recognize that the only real element in the changes occurring and the reforms demanded is radical egalitarianism, one must listen carefully to what is said. The key word is *relevance.* The whole of education must be guided by the standard of relevance. Now, of course, no curriculum was ever intended to be irrelevant; and even if scholars have lost the habit of justifying the importance of their disciplines, there is imbedded in each a serious argument for its study. Relevance is obviously a relative term, implying a standard by which relevant and irrelevant

things are judged. Classical liberal education set as its standard the formation of a man possessing intellectual and moral virtue; relevant studies were those that tended to the perfection of the natural faculties, independent of the particular demands of time or place.

This is not the criterion of relevance referred to by today's students. Those students who are doing most of the talking and popularizing the notion of a relevance—that is, the leftist students—mean that education must be directed to the problems of war, poverty, and, particularly, racism as they now present themselves, in other words, to the problems of contemporary democratic society. They not only argue that these are the fundamental issues to which the universities should address themselves, they also insist that certain kinds of solutions are self-evident. When they talk about justice they do not regard knowledge of justice as a problem; it is almost inconceivable to them that there can be a theoretical questioning of the principle of equality, let alone a practical doubt about it. The universities, as they are seen by these students, are meant to preach certain principles and to study their implementation. The movement is anti-intellectual and has the character of a democratic crusade. The theoretical man who stands outside of the movement, who urges that the university's primary function is the pursuit of clarity about such questions, is easily accused of complacency. Such idle lack of commitment can only be tolerated when we have brought peace, prosperity, and equality to the earth. Not even the richest country ever known can afford to devote any of its resources to the useless cultivation of the mind.

The relevant curriculum is to be promoted, watched over, and used by students. Student participation is the catchword in all talk of university reform. The goals to be achieved by student participation are never explicitly defined. It is enough to refer to the democratic view: everyone has the right to a vote. Faculties and administrations everywhere are bustling to "restructure" the universities with a view to greater student participation in everything; it has become an end in itself. To point out that students do not participate in disciplinary procedures, choice of faculty, establishment of curricula, and so forth is sufficient to demonstrate that decisions are illegitimate. There is almost no concern to show that such participation improves the quality of those decisions or contributes in any way to serious educational goals or even that it satisfies the students' wishes, let alone their real needs. I would venture to suggest that none of the moves toward student participation made in the last four or five years has done anything but generate new demands on their part and cause a deterioration of academic standards, an increase of demagogic teaching, and a loss of the sense of a university's purpose. There is a craze for change, but educators have no vision of the purposes of this change; they have nothing to offer but change itself. The direction is given to the drift by the prevailing winds of democratic extremism. Whether an educational institution can be treated as a political community or whether democracy needs any restraints seems never to be a question.

This is a democratic age and democracy is the special place of the young. According to Plato's analysis, the young in their turn exacerbate the weaknesses of democracy and impel it toward anarchy and ultimately tyranny. He describes our situation before the fact:

> As the teacher in such a situation is frightened of the pupils and fawns on them, so the students make light of their teachers, as well as their attendants. And, generally, the young copy their elders and compete with them in speeches and deeds while the old come down to the level of the young; imitating the young, they are overflowing with facility and charm, and that's so that they won't seem to be unpleasant or despotic.[2]

The young are powerful in democracies for many reasons. Estates are not easily transferable within them, so the authority of fathers is diminished. The hierarchies from which the young are excluded and which characterize other regimes are absent in a democracy. The older people lose their special privileges; and, in the atmosphere of liberty, the bodily pleasures, of which the young are more capable, are emancipated and have a higher status. Equality renders most claims to rule over the young illegitimate: age, wisdom, wealth, moral virtue, good family, are all banished, leaving only number, or consent, and force; and it is more difficult to exclude the young from ruling on the basis of these titles. All of this gives ground for believing that when the young become more demanding and the old more compliant, a new stage of democracy has been reached. The young are taking full advantage of their condition, making use of both their special claims to rule, consent and violence, however contradictory the two may appear to be.

In our democracy there is a further reason, of which Plato did not speak, for the dominance of the young. The radical political movements attempt to establish new kinds of societies, to find solutions to what older wisdom said was insoluble, to overcome necessity and master chance or, as Machiavelli put it, fortune.

> I judge that it is better to be impetuous than circumspect, because fortune is a woman; to keep her down it is necessary to beat her and thrash her. One sees that she lets herself be conquered by the impetuous rather than by those who proceed coldly. And, of course, as a woman she is always a friend to the young, because they are less circumspect, more brutal, and command her with greater audacity.[3]

Those who wish to ride the wave of the future know that the young are most skilled at it and do deference to them as such. Only those who have some conviction of the rightness of their principles can stand against the sea of change, and, as we shall see, this conviction is what seems no longer to be generally possessed.

The democratic ruling body constituted by the students establishes, as do all ruling bodies, policies which further its interests. The substantive reforms, as I have said, have no basis other than that they conduce to the equality of all. Open admissions is the new cry. All citizens must go to college; everyone must be allowed into the halls of learning. And this means, in effect, that everyone must graduate from college, for it will soon be found that it is impossible to fail great masses of students in the age of student power. It immediately follows that standards must be lowered or, rather, utterly abandoned, no matter under what shining banner this change is presented. One of the first points of attack is grading; grades are said to degrade, to make students "grinds" rather than independently thoughtful, to make students part of the system, to encourage bad motivations for study. Although these allegations are not without merit, the real reason for the criticism is that grades make distinctions and indicate that some are better, at least as students, than others. Similarly, required courses and traditional majors begin to be abandoned. It would be hard to argue that these courses and programs of study were very well conceived, but they represented the tattered remnants of some thought about the natural articulation of the kinds of knowledge and what a man must know in order to be called minimally educated. A vacuum called freedom takes their place.

Each student is to be permitted to construct his own curriculum and discover his special genius or realize his unique self. The university can no longer provide guidance as to what is important and set standards based on a view of human perfection. It is blithely assumed that the student is capable of doing so for himself and that he has no need of sublimating discipline. In technical studies, of course, fixed courses of study will remain, because, for example, professors of engineering know what they must teach and what a student must know. But the best students in the better universities are no longer interested in a technical education; they are strongly inclined to what are very loosely called the humanities and the social sciences, and here the universities have abandoned their pedagogic function. It is a perfect solution for educators: in the hallowed name of freedom they are relieved of the responsibility of elaborating a curriculum. The true result of all of this is that the most vulgar and philistine things which proliferate in society at large will dominate the university, for the university cannot, as it should, counterpoise them. If the university does not provide alternatives to the prevalent, where else could the student find them?

One thing is certain: the serious study of classic literature will be sacrificed to the reforming spirit. It does not seem relevant to our students, and it is not to be expected that it would. The importance of classic literature, particularly the philosophic literature, could be recognized by young people only after long and exacting discipline. This is particularly true in America where nothing in the students' past or the world outside the university attests to the significance, or even the existence, of these rare and fine things. It was because the university insisted on them that they were preserved and that a university education could

be understood to be a transforming experience rather than an exercise in self-expression or "doing one's own thing," no matter what it may happen to be.

The fate of classical languages is the model for what is happening in general. They are less and less studied, for they require an effort which seems pedantic and constraining, and they do not simply relate to the students' untutored, unguided experience. In the absence of knowledge of the languages, there can be no serious study of the texts written in them. In our current atmosphere everything has its place, and no one need feel uncomfortable or left out. At the end, whole new kinds of ephemeral study programs emerge, brought into being by the most popular issues of the day or the inclinations of groups of students.

Finally, the criticism is turned on the professors who not only are the protectors of the old ways but also are charged with being negligent of their students. The professors are understood to be primarily teachers who have lost their taste for teaching. The notion that a professor in a university is, in the first place, a scholar and that this must take most of his time is gradually becoming unintelligible. It used to be considered something of a vice for a man to be too much of a teacher because that would lead him into the temptation of adapting his thought to the demands of the market. He should not have to attract students but should provide a model for them of integrity and independence, of a higher motivation, whether they like it or not. The opportunity to be with a learned man should be considered a privilege and not a right, a privilege reserved for the competent and respectful. This was believed to be for the good not only of science but also of the student. But now it is everywhere deemed appropriate that the professor should teach more, be in closer contact with students, and accept their judgments as to his competence. It is not to be denied that a professor sometimes learns from students, that many professors are bad teachers and also bad scholars, and that often criticism can help him to right his ways in both respects. But to assert that students, as a matter of principle, have a right to judge the value of a professor or what he teaches is to convert the university into a market in which the sellers must please the buyers and the standard of value is determined by demand.

It was precisely to provide a shelter from the suffrages of the economic system and the popular will they represent that universities were founded. Now that the student right to judge has become dogma, the universities have become democracies in which the students are the constituencies to which the professors are responsible; the professors no longer look upward toward the gods but downward toward the people, or, rather, *vox populi* has become *vox dei.* A whole new race of charlatans or pastry chefs has come into being who act as the tribunes of the people. One can expect a wholesale departure from the universities of professors of manly independence.

Thus we have gone very far down the road toward equality. It is somehow now held morally reprehensible to believe that equality is limited by natural

differences in men's gifts and that a reasonable understanding of democracy is as a regime which allows men to develop those gifts without conventional or arbitrary hindrances. It is now doctrine that all men are factually equal, and if they do not meet high standards it is due to deprivation or the falseness of the standards. In the theory and practice of our universities we have come to that stage of democratic sentiment at which Tocqueville warned that men prefer equality to freedom, where they are willing to overturn the institutions and laws necessary to freedom in order to gain the sense of equality, where they level rather than raise, indifferent to the deprivations they impose on the superior and on the community at large.

I

What, then, is the future of liberal education in the face of these powerful tides? By *liberal* education I mean education for freedom, particularly the freedom of the mind, which consists primarily in the awareness of the most important human alternatives. Such an education is largely dedicated to the study of the deepest thinkers of the past, because their works constitute the body of learning which we must preserve in order to remain civilized and because anything new that is serious must be based on, and take account of, them. Without such a study a man's mind is almost necessarily a prisoner of the horizon of his particular time and place, and in a democracy that means of the most fundamental premises or prejudices of public opinion. This study has long had only frail support in the United States, and it is what is most threatened at this moment. It is the sole reason for the being of the university as anything more than an advanced high school for the training and detention of the young.

Addressing myself to this question four years ago, I wrote an article for this series assessing the condition of universities with respect to liberal education.[4] At that time the picture was bleak, but there was some basis for hope that in the interstices of the universities with all their bigness this small vital center might be maintained, not because it had any place guaranteed in the principle of the university but simply out of habit supported by the great wealth and diversity of the American university. That hope has all but disappeared. I saw then that the multiversity had no principle of organization, that it was directed to public usefulness rather than knowledge for its own sake, that the university had lost any sense of the unity of knowledge. It had become a place for specialists without any view of, or longing for, wholeness. The students were beginning to be aroused, and their stirrings seemed to express that longing for wholeness which was absent in the rest of the university. However, they too shared the belief of the specialists that the end of the university is public service, practice not theory. And the intensity of their demands, in sharp contrast to the easygoing, live-and-let-live disposition of the specialists, could easily result in a deterioration of the university's intellectual atmosphere. The liberal arts were likely to be

crushed between the aimless diversity of the specialists and the spirit of political reform of the students.

I also saw that administrators were likely to become accomplices of the students for they have almost no education other than that in efficiency; without a clear view of the goals of a university they would, I knew, give in to the greatest pressures. But I based what hopes I had on my belief that the undergraduates did have a *feeling* of what was lacking in the specialist's education; and that their concern for living their lives well might be a wedge for the development of some liberal curricula which would respond to that concern and help to restore some limited sense of the unity of education in a rational and scholarly way. What I did not foresee was, on the one hand, the speed of the collapse of the administrators, and, on the other, the lack of conviction of the professors about the importance of what they were doing. The pieties of the professors about academic freedom and civility have turned out to be largely empty. They are ready to transform the university totally in terms of the untutored wishes of the students. The professors have proved to be so accommodating because they lack clarity, or because they too wish to share the students' idealism, or because they make the interested calculation that their specialties will be spared.

As for the students, I saw in them a potentiality for good or evil. They were freer in some senses than their parents. Necessities of life were better provided to them, and they lived in a world in which most principles of morals, religion, and politics were without great persuasiveness or binding force. This gave them the equipment for a reconsideration of such questions without external constraint. But they were lacking in rootedness, and their almost total lack of education in the tradition gave them no experience of greatness in thought or deed; no books meant much to them. There was that longing for wholeness, partly genuine, partly spurious (in order to have the exhilaration of the sense of depth). Properly controlled and guided, I believed, this longing could be the motor which would drive them to the effort requisite to learn.

But somewhere along the line this dangerous mixture has begun to fall out of balance; perhaps it is, and was always, inevitable, for there is not enough intellectual and moral substance available to discipline their aimless freedom. It was only a small minority of well-endowed students who could have been touched and finally trained, but they required protection and, at the least, an atmosphere of calm in which there is some respect for liberal studies. I suppose that this minority still remains, but all the honors go to a loud group of protestors furnished with easy and appealing ideologies as a substitute for thought; they either attract the really able students, because they appear to represent the only thing that has real force, or they reduce them to a confused silence. At first they seemed to be questing for guidance and leadership of a sort to respond to their sentiments. But, of course, they are easily dupes of movements, political and intellectual, which play to their tastes and are largely sham.

How can they judge, having neither experience nor knowledge? Every year

their souls are thinner from want of spiritual nourishment; their openness becomes emptiness, the soil within incapable of sustaining any deep-rooted plant. They test the possible authorities to which they turn and find that none has the power to inspire them or resist them. The adult world makes itself contemptible, seeming to represent nothing itself, and, in what can only appear to the young to be cowardly flattery, praises the idealism and morality of those who have never had the chance to practice either. The great change comes when students no longer quest but teach, confident that they know the answers and are sufficient unto themselves. One of the ugliest spectacles is that of a young person who has no awe, who is shameless, who does not sense his imperfection, for it is the charm of youth to be potentiality striving to perfect itself, to be an essential incompleteness which may one day be truly complete. Adults are almost always imperfect; a youth is surely imperfect, but he at least offers the hope of development. But self-contempt is the basis of self-improvement, and this generation has nothing left in god or man against which to measure itself. Plato's description of the democratic man now seems most appropriate:

> . . . he doesn't admit it . . . if someone says that there are some pleasures belonging to fine and good desires and some belonging to bad desires. . . . He shakes his head at all this and says that all are alike and must be honored on an equal basis. . . . He lives along day by day, gratifying the desire that occurs to him, at one time drinking and listening to the flute, at another downing water and reducing; now practicing gymnastics, and again idling and neglecting everything; and sometimes spending his time as though he were occupied with philosophy. Often he engages in politics and jumping up, says and does whatever chances to come to him. . . .[5]

To Plato's account must be added a somewhat more sinister element: a rage at the emptiness of this life, and a desire to commit oneself to acts of revolutionary violence. Nonviolence has more or less silently been dropped from the creed of the New Left. College now means to more and more students a place where the young educate the nation and practice self-expression. It should not be surprising that the aristocratic aspiration which democracy frustrates should find its outlet on the radical left. Under the banner of equality these privileged students can lead and, with impunity, express their contempt for the people.

The universities were a fertile field for this development. A survey of the so-called liberal arts segments of the universities reveals that they are unarticulated heaps of departments, each teaching specialized disciplines which have presuppositions that are hardly discussed and are frequently incompatible with those of other disciplines. These disciplines have aggregated to the university at various times over the last one thousand years. There is little coherence to them nor does a view of life and the world evidently emerge from any separately or all together. The most important question has been forgotten, and even the means

for a rational discussion of the unity of the university or the unity of life seem to have been lost. We seem to have to make do with tradition or whatever the winds of the day bring along. The state of academic philosophy, which should be the unifying discipline, indicates the severity of the problem. Today it is largely dominated by linguistic analysis which is merely a method for studying discourse rather than itself a source of discourse; it is a universal rule book for playing the game, but it does not tell us what the game is or play it itself. The natural sciences are a world unto themselves, dealing with what are presumably important problems, but they are unable to do anything about conveying their meaning within the total picture. The humanities have also become specialties, and it is rare to find a convincing explanation of their importance; the literatures studied are very rarely understood to be of vital significance for life today, and certainly they are undermined by the notion that science is the domain of reason and cannot understand the world of poetry. And the social sciences are slavishly imitating the natural sciences and are further hampered by their own principle, the fact-value distinction, from speaking about the moral and political good, which is what agitates the students.

Thus when students ask about the good life and the nature of our world, they are met by a deafening silence, for there are no men in the university whose competence enables them to respond to such questions. Many professors are answering the students but not on the basis of their competence; they are biologists or psychologists, or whatever else, speaking about what they have never studied, never adequately reflected on, and what is in no way connected with the things they can claim to know. The questions and pressures of students during these past six years have created a stir among academic men, but it has not caused them to undertake a serious reconsideration of the state of our learning or to look toward a philosophic and scholarly treatment of the issues raised. That just seems impossible; the whole is approached by way of feeling, by identification with popular movements, by "commitment" or "concern." The professors do not try to educate these longings; they try to share them without transforming them. What some social scientists proudly name "post-behavioralism" consists in nothing more than an attempt to keep the "value" hungry wolves from the door.

The university has proved itself incapable of teaching students about the good life because that is not a subject that any part of our universities even knows how to discuss; it belongs to no department nor any group of them added together. The education of our professors has been a specialized, technical one, with more or less old-style humanities mixed in but not really taken seriously or penetrating the special discipline. We have hardly a reminiscence of what was once the central business of universities. During and just after World War II, America was the beneficiary of many generally and humanely educated European scholars. Whatever the difficulties of the teachings many brought with them, these men had roots deep in the best thinkers and had the habit of

justifying what they taught by them. One might have thought that the example of their learning and persons would fundamentally affect our universities. But the enormous expansion of higher education and the growth of the multiversity simply drowned their influence. Now, even in the unlikely event that it were to be thought that the philosophic, unifying, synoptic education needed to be re-established, we would not be in a position to do so, for we no longer have the teachers who sufficiently know or care for the great tradition or are capable of working through the prejudices which seem to have rendered it meaningless and irrelevant.

Until the students became vocal, the university was characterized by easygoing indifference to larger purposes; each discipline followed its own internal development and the administration held the whole together. In the new era, scientists and humanists have come out to meet the students, praise them, agree to reorder "the priorities" and announce that the real purposes of the universities are those proposed by the political movements of the left. Thus a direction and purpose is again given to the university, and a community is established around this purpose. The only problem is whether that purpose is in any way consistent with the premises of science and scholarship.

Some professors become disturbed when they recognize that they must change their teaching in order to fit the movement and that the integrity of their discipline is threatened, that the passionate desires of the indignant are not consonant with the results of dispassionate rational inquiry. But such worried professors are more than counterbalanced by those professors who, excited by their new roles and liberated from what they now recognize to be the fragmented character of their existence, are willing to make their disciplines "relevant." The strength of this group is reenforced by the more or less active support of another group of professors, composed most particularly of natural scientists, who see no threat of a new Lysenkoism in their disciplines and who therefore are of the opinion they can have their cake and eat it. The fact that the interests of the professors can differ so much indicates how little of a real *intellectual* community there was and hence how partial the lives of the professors had become. In these circumstances, the university was an easy conquest for the first movement which exposed its lack of purpose or conviction and which proposed to restore the wholeness of life, the absence of which was even beginning to trouble the complacent professors. This movement usurped the position in the university which by right belonged to liberal education and in the process abolished the throne—occupied by weak and illegitimate pretenders—of the only legitimate ruler, philosophy.

II

Although the universities have had little to offer in the way of reflection or leadership in recent years, there are those who have jumped into the void created by

the absence of philosophy and spoken to the general issues. There is not much thought reflected in what they say but there is the decay of a certain kind of thought here and its language is the only language which appeals to students. Although there have been few political movements which make such modest demands on the minds of their adherents or which have been so profoundly anti-intellectual, this one too is, of course, founded on a comprehensive view of things and is guided by that view. That view was not a product of the founders of the movement, and, because its followers are so unselfconscious, they are unaware of its sources and its implications. They are prisoners of certain European, particularly German, teachings which migrated to the United States and have been so successfully assimilated that they now seem native and part of common sense. We have adopted the language and the consequences of these teachings from the European professors who helped to bring them but have absorbed almost none of the learning which should accompany them. At all events, when thought out, these teachings lead to views and ways of life which are antithetical to this regime, and their dominance would surely undermine it. The German thought reflected in the current language of politics is the thought which is at the roots of both communism and fascism. Although the present political movements are democratic in that they propose to speak for all men, and they are egalitarian, they are based on a critique of liberal democracy and a hostility to it. The egalitarian movement has gathered into its bosom the teachings of men who were, to say the least, not friends of democracy and has used them to the furtherance of equality. The only sacrifice is free society as we know it. Prudent observers who knew something of modern philosophy were not surprised to find that kind of irrationalism which is open to violence, tyranny, and racism emerging in the New Left. This was a necessity of its principles, as I shall try to show.

In the events that have occurred within the universities these past few years, the most sobering fact which has emerged is that neither in the things that are taught in them nor in the actions or reactions of those who are supposed to be responsible for their preservation is there much evidence of a conviction of the truth of the principles on which liberal democracy and the liberal university are founded. When such conviction is lacking, institutions and laws have lost their vitality and maintain themselves only by inertia; their replacement by new modes and orders is only a matter of time. This is not to suggest that by preaching the principles one can give them life; it is only meant as an observation. Somehow our principles are no longer persuasive. Our condition is beautifully characterized by a passage in Dostoyevsky's *Possessed*:

> Do you know that we are tremendously powerful already? Our party does not consist only of those who commit murder and arson, fire off pistols in the traditional way, or bite colonels. . . . Listen. I've reckoned them all up: a teacher who laughs with children at their God and at their cradle is on our side. The lawyer

> who defends an educated murderer because he is more cultured than his victims and could not help murdering them to get money is one of us. The schoolboys who murder a peasant for the sake of sensation are ours. The juries who acquit every criminal are ours. The prosecutor who trembles at a trial for fear he should not seem advanced enough is ours, ours. Among officials and literary men we have lots, lots, and they don't know it themselves.... Do you know how many we shall catch by little, ready-made ideas? When I left Russia, Littre's dictum that crime is insanity was all the rage; I came back and find that crime is no longer insanity, but simply common sense, almost a duty; anyway, a gallant protest.

That is a nihilist speaking, looking at the dissolution of the horizon within which his people had lived. The similarity of this situation to our own is no accident. The speaker is not referring essentially to the decay of the Czarist regime but of Western justice and morality and that is what we are experiencing in all liberal society today. Dostoyevsky was one of a small group of clairvoyant men in the last half of the nineteenth century who saw that somehow the old world was sick and dying, not meaning by the "old world" states or regimes, but the Biblical and classical morality which stood behind and made possible all states and regimes as we have known them or can imagine them. Nihilism was a response to the incipient death of all that had gone before, an expression of the meaninglessness of life without a compelling horizon of values, an attempt to destroy the lifeless body which remained after the vital center had died, and, perhaps, a hope of a new world, the outlines of which we cannot yet perceive but to which we must be dedicated for the sake of life. Civil societies are constituted by what they respect, by what men bow their heads before in reverence. When they no longer have anything before which they can bow, their world is near its end, and all the suppressed and lawless monsters within man reemerge. One might suggest that our New Left is a strange mixture of nihilism with respect to past and present and a naive faith in a future of democratic progress.

To put this more compellingly for Americans, the old liberalism is no longer of real concern to today's students. By the old liberalism I mean either the thought of the founding fathers who believed in the natural rights of man, established by reason and applicable to all men, and who constructed a nation dedicated to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or that of men like John Stuart Mill who believed in the open society dedicated to free speech and the self-determined private life. To the extent that Locke, the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist,* or Mill are taught in the universities, they are historical matter and hardly anyone supposes that they can be believed or taken as guides for our lives. Without entering into the merits of that older liberal thought, it somehow no longer satisfies the soul for this generation of mankind and seems to be taking its place alongside the teachings which legitimized monarchy and aristocracy in the graveyard of history. Adults still refer to its principles, but when protests against war, poverty, or racism contradict them, those

protests carry the day. It is not believed that liberal society insures substantive justice. And anyone whose "life style" is hostile to that of liberal society is considered justified or even heroic in "opting out" of it. What appeals to students now is the language of Marxism and existentialism; it seems to them to describe their situation.

It is a most striking fact that since Mill there has not been a single really influential book supporting liberal democratic society, and Mill cannot be compared in power or depth to men like Marx or Nietzsche, who were his critics. Liberal democracy has come to seem to be negative; it wishes to provide the conditions for freedom or the good life, but it does not give prescriptions for the use of freedom or define the good life. Its neutrality permits the dominance of any one of very many possible ways of life, some of them unattractive. Marx could plausibly assert that it was merely the condition for the existence of bourgeois capitalism, and that freedom meant primarily freedom to be a worker or an owner in this kind of system. And Nietzsche argued that liberal democracy was the home of "the last man," a being without heart or conviction, a shriveled manikin dedicated only to preservation and comfort. All of this criticism has become commonplace in the unremitting attack on white, complacent, middle-class America; it was vulgarized in America by men like [Erich] Fromm and [Herbert] Marcuse. The models for admiration are no longer statesmen but bohemians or revolutionaries.

But in the improbable wedding of Marx and Nietzsche which has recently been arranged, it is clear that Nietzsche is the dominant partner in spite of his rightist inclinations. Marx's egalitarianism, concentration on the poor, hatred of imperialism, and so forth, have been maintained, and leftists would still like to style themselves Marxists. But they no longer read the serious Marx; *Capital* seems both boring and irrelevant; the only Marx which is attractive is found in the early, so-called humanistic, writings, the study of which is of very recent origin. And the attack on reason, the use of terms like self, authenticity, and commitment, which are on everybody's lips, show plainly enough to what extent the Marxist teaching has been adulterated by a newer and more compelling kind of thought and a different understanding of the goals of politics. The New Left is not the Old Left, but is rather a result of the assimilation of the thought of Nietzsche and [Martin] Heidegger to that of the Old Left. However this may be, the prevalent discussion in the highest seats of learning is, to a greater or lesser degree, in the terms of postliberal thought, and this means that soon everyone will think in this way.

But it would perhaps be best to see the changes in our thought by looking to the recent history of the social sciences in America. The social sciences are the disciplines in which one would most expect the political and moral life of man to be discussed and are the sources of our understanding of them. For more than thirty years the social sciences have been dominated by the fact-value distinction. This distinction was made by German sociologists in the 1890s and

most influentially propounded by Max Weber. It was imported to this country by sociologists and political scientists in the 1920s. This distinction was based on the assertion that no judgments of good and bad, no moral distinctions, could be grounded on reason, that they were subjective acts of the mind, preferences. The goals by which we guide our lives constitute a horizon by which we orient ourselves, but that horizon is an act of human creativity, not one of reason; no horizon can claim to be authoritative or demonstrable. Weber was persuaded of the truth of this analysis and attempted to salvage some possibility for the existence of science, of the reasonable quest for objective truth. Science was to be the noble endeavor of overcoming one's own values in the name of truth. The consequences of all this for our lives are, as Weber knew, quite far-reaching. Little attention was, however, given by American social scientists to assessing the effect of the distinction or, for that matter, to proving its validity. They accepted it and devoted themselves to the elaboration of an objective social science based on it; they were enchanted by the vision of a value-free social science which would be comparable to the natural sciences.

Although the science itself has not been very impressive, the success of the viewpoint has been breathtaking. Today even school children use the word *value* where another generation would have spoken of good and evil. The new social science had the effect of banishing good and bad, the discussion of the ends, from the domain of the sciences or reason. That was no longer a scholarly theme. The social scientists still had to live as men as well as scholars; but they were almost to a man liberal democrats; they accepted that as their value. And, unlike Weber, they used the fact-value distinction as a means of sparing themselves the necessity of being concerned about the status of their value. This was just fine until that value was challenged. It had lost its dignity; liberal democracy was just one value among many, and it had eroded from long neglect.

When the students wanted to implement certain policies and found apathy and indifference among adults, they, and their professorial camp followers, launched an attack on value-free social science, insisting that the social sciences should be primarily concerned with values. They accused the social scientists of being easygoing accomplices of the established order. The social scientists were indeed supporters of this order and were also unable to give an account of their reasons for being so. They simply believed that no sane man would question the superiority of liberal democracy to all available alternatives. Indeed, the fact-value distinction had become the last intellectual bastion of liberal democracy: in the absence of any demonstrable superiority of one value over another, that regime which tolerated all values might be understood to be preferable to one which did not. Moreover, since values are equal, they seem to be democratic. Every man has a right to his own values; no one need feel inferior. But the social scientists were utterly unprepared to resist a large group who insisted that its values had to be accepted no matter what others wanted. After all, why not?

It is to be noted that the students, as was to be expected, themselves adopted the fact-value distinction. They made no attempt to return to Marx, who thought that the true goals of human life could be determined by reason. They merely looked at the fact-value distinction and recognized that there was no intrinsic reason why we should concentrate on facts; that choice in itself is a value judgment. Science seems to have demonstrated that the most important thing—the right way of life is the most important thing—is not amenable to scientific, that is rational, treatment. This means men must abandon reason and turn to the establishment of values. This is precisely the analysis made by the profoundest European thinkers in the last century who took the value question seriously. The positing of values is, in this perspective, the most important human activity, and all the specialized activities are guided by the values posited. Thus the social scientists, men so dedicated to reason, were astonished to see their students, even their own children, denying reason, turning to Eastern religions, addicted to drugs, toying with violence, becoming a new breed or species unintelligible to rationalists. But in a sense they were going to the end of roads which their teachers and parents had opened but had themselves not traveled. Phenomena such as the use of drugs cannot be understood on mere sociological and psychological grounds. They are the consequences of the problems in our thought. If reason is superficial, then the irrational must be cultivated for the enrichment of life.

Much of what we recognize to be the most advanced contemporary opinion follows as a consequence from the fact-value distinction. Man is the value-producing being; that is the great discovery implicit in the distinction. If it is values which guide reason, then one must look beneath rational consciousness, the *ego,* to an unconscious, an *id,* a self, in order to find out what man is and discover a source for a meaningful life. This self cannot be understood by reason; it must be creative and hence beyond prediction; it must be listened to as an oracle. One cannot know what it will produce or whether what it produces is good or bad. It is the absolute beginning. With this we see the origin of our concentration on the self and its fulfillment. It is the modern substitute for the soul, which is a rationally ordered structure and is dependent on and subordinate to the order of the *cosmos.* The self has no order and it is dependent on nothing; it makes a *cosmos* out of the chaos that is really outside by imposing an order of values upon it.

In most discussion today one finds little elaboration of what the self is; rather the self is defined by what it is opposed to. The great illness of modern man, according to our critics, is alienation or other-directedness. This means to live according to other people's values, whether they are expressed in laws, schools, work, or whatever. A man who lives in that way is divorced from his self and is hollow. Education must not impose values on the student but let his own values develop and grow. In the absence of any objective standard for judging a man's words or deeds, the only test can be whether they are his own

or another's, whether he is a true self or alienated, inner-directed or other-directed, authentic or hypocritical. Authentic is really the word, the replacement for good. Many different ways of life can be authentic; the standard is only in the honesty or sincerity of the expression of that way of life. No matter how criminal or foul you may be, you are cleansed if you are sincere about it; hypocritical obedience to law is the human crime; Jean Genêt is superior by far to the bourgeois father and citizen.

How can one then be sure that one is sincere, that one's values are authentic? Such assurance cannot be achieved by comparison of one man's values with those of another. The only proof is in the intensity of one's *commitment,* in the ultimate case by being willing to die for one's value, in the assertion of one's value against the chaotic outside, bravely facing all risks. It is the strong-willed versus the weak-willed instead of the good versus the bad. We praise men now, not for the rightness of their cause, but because they care; the primary thing is not truth but concern. This, of course, puts a premium on fanaticism, not to speak of fakery.

At all events, man as the value-needing and value-producing animal leads directly to the view that the good society is one which allows selves to commit themselves to authentic values and to grow in terms of them. This is exactly the prescription of the New Left. It is, of course, in the absence of elaboration, empty. One has no idea what such a society would be like; it is utterly unprogrammatic. But it is just such a vision which allows for the most complete rejection and destruction of the present regime and the greatest self-indulgence without guilt; and to be committed to this vision gratifies moralistic vanity at the same time. It is the best of many possible worlds.

Nietzsche, who was the first to present a profound teaching of the self, understood it to be an aristocratic teaching, for true selves are rare. The kind of man who can create a horizon for a whole people and make his values theirs and thus ennoble their lives is extremely rare. This is a natural distinction among men, and democratic society, according to him, effaces this distinction. But, as is easy to see, this teaching, or a corruption of it, easily becomes grist for the mill for radical egalitarianism. Objective standards encourage distinctions of rank among men; each self is a standard unto itself, and there is no rational basis for comparison of one self with another. The self justifies the most extreme freedom, for there is nothing in nature to which the self is subservient; the self is the creator, the Biblical God possessed uniquely by everyone.

In politics, teachings tend to be transformed by what is most powerful in the regime and in turn transform the regime in the direction of its most dangerous tendencies. The corruption of a teaching which was intended to be noble is peculiarly revolting. Not content with understanding democratic citizens as self-regarding but decent men who try to live by laws they themselves set down for the good of the community, we have had to make them into gods to whom nothing can be compared. Every man must be understood to be creative, no

matter how much the standards of art and taste have to be debauched in order to do so. Political restraint and moderation must give way to ugly fanaticism in order to give everyone the chance to be committed. The grossest indecencies are permitted in the name of sincerity. And the wisdom of the ages must be forgotten in order to avoid alienating a growing self.

All of this tends to intensify the conformism—the increasingly monolithic quality of life—which it is supposed to overcome; for in the absence of real goals to strive for, men are most likely to fall back into their animal sameness, into the common instincts in the satisfaction of which all men are alike. Real diversity is never the result of the concentration on diversity. And at the same time as we are likely to produce greater conformity, we do not stop to consider whether the *laissez aller* we encourage is consonant with civility or political justice. No one asks whether we have any right to be so hopeful that every healthy self will posit nice civil values for itself which are consonant with everyone else's self-realization. Is there any built-in assurance that the unrestrained growth of each individual will not encroach on the vital space of other individuals? Yet this is all that seems to be talked about; the situation is parallel to that in which Rousseau's rhetoric of compassion was used by every dry, self-serving French bureaucrat in the nineteenth century. One thing at least is certain: in all of this there is no concern for justifying or preserving those restraints which have been necessary to the life of every community ever known to man. If neither reason nor tradition can bring about consensus, then the force of the first man resourceful and committed enough must needs do so.

It cannot be doubted that the status of values is a most perplexed and difficult question. Great men have contributed to the present view of things. They must be studied carefully, and the alternatives to them must be equally considered. Reason can only be abandoned reasonably; without this serious examination the modern view becomes empty and dangerous nonsense. It is precisely in this context that the value of liberal democracy becomes manifest; it is the only regime which permits and encourages such a quest. It should be the university's vocation to carry out this quest. In order for it to restore itself today, its faculties would have to make common cause in defense of free inquiry and at the same time protect and encourage those students who wish to learn. It is highly questionable whether it would any longer be capable of such an effort, for it lacks the awareness, the desire, and the personnel. Instead radical egalitarianism is a dogma within it. Given the increasing and menacing pressures for conformity growing up within the university, it seems reasonable to ask whether it will not be necessary for thinking men to return to the isolation of private life in order to be able to think freely. This is not a happy thought for our universities. However, there is also a larger question: is liberal democracy conceivable in the absence of the liberal university? The liberal university appears to be both the highest expression of liberal democracy and a condition of its perpetuation.

Appendix

These reflections were set to paper in 1969. The following academic year, 1969–70, only hastened the progress of the disease I have described, culminating in faculties and presidents of major universities, under extreme pressure from students and in their desire to recapture their students' respect, taking political stands on current issues. It was accepted that the business of the university can be interrupted in the name of political activism and that students who abandon their studies to participate will suffer no consequences, that they will receive credit equally with those who do the work of students.

At the moment there appears to be a calm on our campuses, and it may very well endure for a time. But one should not be misled as to the meaning of that calm. The principle of student power has been largely victorious; the students are now at something of a loss as to what to do with that victory. Nothing has been done to reestablish respect for the proper purposes of the university or the rules requisite to the fulfillment of those purposes. The relative quiet results also in part from outside pressure. Hostility to universities has expressed itself in many ways but in particular in the tightening of the purse strings. The highly favorable disposition of the general public toward universities, which was an essential element in the possibility of their success, has been undermined. The public has apparently finally been persuaded of the view of our universities so loudly propounded by students and professors and has come to wonder why it should support such institutions. Economic motivations do indeed seem to have some effect on this generation of idealists.

Notes

1. Plato, *Republic,* VI 492 a–e.
2. Ibid., VIII 563 a–b.
3. Machiavelli, *The Prince,* chap. 25.
4. Allan Bloom, "The Crisis of Liberal Education" in *Higher Education and Modern Democracy,* ed. Robert A. Goldwin (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1967).
5. Plato, *Republic,* VIII 561 c–d.